

Judgment Day

People don't like being told that they're bad. And they especially don't like it if it's going to cost them a lot to be good. Finding other ways out is preferable, even if it requires some violence to the truth. Today we look at some ways people try to evade responsibility.

[Please read [the previous post](#) before continuing.]

A large number of people insist that “things aren't proven” or “aid doesn't work”. In his 1996 book *Living High and Letting Die* Peter Unger reports a study where he found that, including in administrative expenses and other overhead, \$200 could feed a malnourished child through the highest-risk childhood years. UNICEF [just recently released a new report](#) finding that, for the first time, the number of children dying before 5 has fallen, thanks to their intervention. And Oxfam, to take just one example, through its development projects in Cambodia [has helped over 35,000 people](#) come to support themselves. [Doctors Without Borders reports](#) that they treated 10 million people last year, treating 26,000 people from cholera, for example, and treating 63,000 children for malnutrition. Even the most vocal critics of aid, like William Easterly, who has written many books and op-eds attacking government aid programs as unhelpful, has to concede that private projects like Oxfam and UNICEF are successful and positive. Nobody, of course, provides any real argument against these things. They just say it's “too unclear”.

If that's the real issue, then [donate to an organization like Poverty Action Lab](#) at MIT. PAL does controlled randomized trials of the success of aid interventions. Your money won't go directly to help people, but it will help to test other people's aid interventions and improve their effectiveness. [A recent report](#) [PDF] finds that mass deworming programs dropped infections by 23 points and increased school participation by 25% (thanks, in part, to spillover effects), apparently caused children to grow taller and healthier, and cost only \$5 for each disability-adjusted year of life saved.

[Barry Kelly insists](#) that he has no duty to help others and thus is not culpable for their suffering. Of course, this is an irrelevance. Nobody is trying to put him on trial — just arguing he should do more to help.

But Barry goes one step further: he says that he should not help because giving his money to starving people would lead to “lack of incentive to compete, lack of investment base for risky & experimental ventures, and congealing layers of bureaucracy feeding on income redistribution.” Taking this at face value for a moment, it is not clear to me why saving people from starvation would cause the first two — wouldn't there be a huge incentive to compete for saving lives and trying new experimental techniques in doing so? Perhaps Barry means that the first-world might have less competition in a field like, say, luxury watches. I don't see this as a tragedy. It amazes me that someone would admit that they prefer to have millions of people starve to death than to have a complicated bureaucracy.

In response, [Barry explains](#) that “there needs to be a cost-benefit analysis”. He does not explain what he wants to analyze. Should we make a little chart with the benefits of competition in the luxury watch market on one side and the benefits of saving people from starvation on the other?

He also argues that we should do nothing about starvation because many people die in car accidents. I am not sure how this is relevant, but I deplore the deaths of people in car accidents and personally do not drive because of it.

[Sohail provides](#) the amazing argument that one shouldn't donate to UNICEF because “They have a business model that revolves around needy people. To keep the model going, you need needy people.” It is not clear how this principle is supposed to work. Are the people at UNICEF supposed to be quietly sabotaging their efforts in order to preserve their jobs? Since non-profit employees generally take large salary cuts and do unusually-onerous work, this seems wildly unlikely. If they wanted a safe job they would surely join the for-profit sector. Sohail provides no evidence for this amazing claim.

[MC argues](#) that people will starve since he no longer purchases their products. But certainly fewer people will starve if he spends his money directly on keeping people from starving as opposed to having people not starve incidentally because he is purchasing TVs from them. Is he claiming that the people not starving right now somehow have a special right not to starve? It's hard to see why that would be the case.

[That Hypothetical says](#) that “Development economics is a complex subject.” I'm not sure how this is relevant. Perhaps in the ancient society the King has a lot of scholars working for him making the issue of how to decide which person to choose into some complex subject. That doesn't change the moral issues.

[Mike Bruce says](#) that if we all spent our disposable income on helping starving people, we might face economic collapse. This seems absurd but also certainly isn't a question anyone is facing. Even if all the readers of this blog spent all their disposable income on preventing starvation, that would be inconsequential in economic terms.

There are actual arguments against the issues raised in the last post. These are not them.

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